July 7, 2017
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Endangered Species Coordinator
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
Region 2 Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Missoula Conservation District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Enclosed is an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward a project to remove headwater stream crossings and road systems in Upper Deer Creek, a tributary to Seeley Lake. Deer Creek is located approximately 13 miles NW of the community of Seeley Lake in Missoula County.

Please submit any comments by August 6, 2017 to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the address listed above. The funding for this project through the FFIP is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish & Wildlife Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Habitat Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Deer Creek Road Decommissioning

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted sections 87-1-272 through 273, MCA that direct Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. This legislation was amended again in 2013 to open the program to all native fish species (statute section 87-1-283). The program now calls for the enhancement of native fish through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the FFIP.

The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward a project that would remove numerous undersized culverts, decommission roads, reconstruct stream crossings, and undertake large scale revegetation. The goal is to protect and enhance native Bull Trout and Westslope Cutthroat Trout populations.

I. Location of Project:

This project will be conducted on Deer Creek, a tributary to Seeley Lake, located approximately 13 miles NW of the town of Seeley Lake within Township 17N, Range 16W, Sections 8 and 9 in Missoula County (Figure 1).

II. Need for the Project:

One goal within FWP's six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "protect, maintain, and restore native fish populations, their habitats, life cycles, and genetic diversity to ensure stewardship of native species." This project is part of a larger watershed-scale plan to protect and enhance native Westslope Cutthroat and Bull Trout. The project area contains spawning and rearing areas, and is expected to improve overall watershed health and sediment delivery in an area that is vital habitat.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to remove numerous undersized culverts, decommission roads, reconstruct stream crossings, and undertake large scale revegetation. The goal is to protect and enhance native Bull Trout and Westslope Cutthroat Trout populations. The project is expected to cost $41,675. Of this total, the FFIP would be contributing up to $20,000 to complete the project.

Contributor	In-kind services	In-kind cash
Milltown Dam Bull Trout Mitigation Funds (held by FWP, from Northwestern Energy)		$21,675
Total: $21,675		

IV. Environmental Impact Review Checklist:

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment

Project Title: Deer Creek Road Decommissioning
Division/Bureau: Fisheries Division / Habitat Bureau (FFIP)
Description of Project: The project proposes to remove numerous undersized culverts, decommission roads, reconstruct stream crossings, and undertake large scale revegetation. The goal is to protect and enhance native Bull Trout and Westslope Cutthroat Trout populations.

A. POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture			X			X
2. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
3. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)			X			X
4. Existing water right or reservation				X		
5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality			X			X
6. Unique, endangered, or fragile vegetative species				X		
7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats			X			X
8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species			X			X
9. Introduction of new species into an area				X		
10. Changes to abundance or movement of species			X			X

B. POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Noise and/or electrical effects				X		
2. Land use				X		
3. Risk and/or health hazards				X		
4. Community impact				X		
5. Public services/taxes/utilities				X		
6. Potential revenue and/or project maintenance costs				X		
7. Aesthetics and recreation			X	X		X
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		X
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture

This project is expected to improve soil stability through removal of road prisms and with large scale revegetation. The road decommissioning is expected to reduce sediment delivery to the stream and return the area to its natural function. Undersized culverts will also be removed, making the overall impact a naturally functioning stream and riparian area. The overall impact is expected to be positive.

3. Water quantity, quality, and distribution.

There will be no change in water quantity, but a positive change in quality is expected. The road decommissioning and revegetation efforts are expected to reduce sediment inputs to the stream. A 318 authorization will be obtained, if necessary, to meet short-term water quality standards. Long term, the project is expected to improve water quality through reduced sediment inputs.

5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality

Vegetation cover, quantity, and quality will all be positively affected by this project. When the roads are decommissioned and the undersized culverts are removed, the areas will be revegetated. The result should be a naturally functioning riparian and upland area with native grasses that will increase in quality over time.

7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats.

This project would create and restore stream and riparian habitats. Sedimentation is expected to

be reduced, the stream will be reconstructed at crossings, and there will be large scale revegetation. The result is expected to be a net increase in both terrestrial and aquatic habitats, which is significant in a known native trout spawning and rearing area.

8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species.

This project will benefit Westslope Cutthroat Trout, which is recognized as a species of concern in Montana and is federally sensitive, and Bull Trout, a species of concern in Montana and a federally threatened species. The impacts on these species due to this project are predicted to be positive, potentially increasing recruitment and survival of these populations.

10. Changes to abundance or movement of species.

Deer Creek provides Westslope Cutthroat and Bull Trout recruitment directly to Seeley Lake and the Clearwater Valley chain of lakes. Improvements to spawning and rearing habitat may benefit these populations if recruitment is increased as a result of reduced sediment and improved spawning habitat.

VI. Explanation of Impacts to the Human Environment

7. Aesthetics and recreation

This project will take old mining roads and decommission them. The roads chosen are high in the Deer Creek drainage, on FWP property, and the areas of decommissioning were chosen based on the impact to the stream and the overall benefit to aquatic and riparian areas. Recreation was an important consideration in project development and the decommissioning will incorporate a hiking path so they are still accessible by the public. The decommissioned and restored areas will have a positive impact to aesthetics and will look more natural over time.

8. Cultural and historic resources.

No cultural or historical resource impacts are anticipated. However, the State Historical Preservation Office will be notified of the project, and any potential concerns will be addressed.

VII. Narrative Evaluation and Comment.

There are no anticipated cumulative effects.

VIII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative.

If no funding is provided through the FFIP, either the applicant would have to seek additional sources of funding to complete the project, or the affected area of Deer Creek would be impacted

by sediment and impaired stream health. This is important habitat for native trout in an area that is important for conservation and climate change resiliency.

2. The Proposed Alternative.

The proposed alternative intends to provide partial funding through the FFIP to restore upper Deer Creek through the removal of headwater stream crossings and road systems.

IX. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section.

1. Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction:

Department of Environmental Quality, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corps of Engineers, Missoula Conservation District, State Historical Preservation Office

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

None.

3. Is an EIS required?

No. We conclude, from this review, that the proposed activities will have an overall positive impact on the physical and human environment, and will therefore not require the extensive analysis associated with an EIS.

4. Level of public involvement.

The project application to the FFIP has been posted on the FWP webpage for public comment. No comments have been received to date. The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the FFIP. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The EA will be distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter and will be published on the FWP webpage: **www.fwp.mt.gov**.

5. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 11:59PM, August 6, 2017.

6. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA.

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
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FIGURE 1: project location